

The Sisterhood
of the
Holy Nativity
By an Associate





In the All Saints season of 1882, when the Church was listening to the words of the Master—"Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness," a few devout women heard the call to the special work of arousing in others their own "hunger and thirst", that leaders and led together might "follow Christ's blessed Saints in all virtuous and godly living". This call was in large measure made clear and compelling by the personal inspiration and wise judgment of the Sister who was to become the Mother Foundress of the new Community. Under the guidance of the Founder, the Rev. C. C. Grafton, later Bishop of Fond du Lac, who had had wide experience as spiritual director of some of the English Sisterhoods, and who felt keenly the need in the American Church of the example and service of the Religious Life, the new Community was formed. It was dedicated to the Mystery of the Incarnation and, the first manifestation

of that Mystery being the Birth at Bethlehem, the Sisterhood took the name of the Holy Nativity.

There were already Communities doing noble work in hospitals, asylums, schools and other institutions; but there were none with the *immediate* aim of extending and establishing the Catholic Faith, to which this Community was to be devoted. With the interior call to this work came also a marked exterior call in the urgent requests of many parochial clergy for the aid of Sisters. As Sisterhoods were not large enough to plant branches in many cities, the clear-sighted Founder saw that the Church needed a Missionary Order, which, by its Rule, would be free to go from town to town, as invited, assisting the Clergy in seeking the strayed, lapsed, and ignorant, giving instruction in the elements of the Faith, preparing candidates for the reception of the Sacraments, and extending the spiritual kingdom by winning souls—returning to their Convent when their temporary work was done. With this aim the Constitution and Rule were prepared, and were approved by a number of able theologians, including Bishops, and the Sisterhood of the Holy Nativity began its work of spreading the “good tidings of great joy,” as revealed in the Incarnation and Its extension in the living Church of Jesus Christ.

The first home of the Community was in Boston, near the Church of the Advent, of which the Founder was then Rector, and where the Sisters were employed

in parish work, including the reverent care of the Altars of the beautiful church, the charge of guilds and classes, and ministrations to the poor and ignorant, and to the often thoughtless rich and educated who need arousing to the “hunger for God.”

After the resignation of the Founder as Rector of the Church of the Advent, the Community, invited to establish itself in Rhode Island, moved its home to one of the stately mansions in Providence. The great house, among its sheltering trees, was speedily adapted to its new purpose. Serene faces of saints and angels smiled down from the grand stairway; the sweet-voiced bell rang its seven-times-a-day call to prayer, and through the rooms once gay with worldly music and festivities floated at each nightfall the humble, joyful praise of the Magnificat. The temporary Chapel was carefully fitted, and its Altar made fair for the daily coming of the Lord.

After the removal, the Sisterhood continued its former lines of work, and extended its activities by meeting the increased demand for Church embroidery and for Altar Breads. The Sisters worked in St. Stephen’s parish, giving Bible classes, visiting the sick and poor, etc., and also assisted the clergy in other city and suburban parishes.

A particularly interesting field of labor was opened in the mill village of Thornton, some miles from Providence. Thornton was settled by English operatives,

brought over under contract, and left for years without the ministrations of the Church, spending their high wages in drink and gambling. In visiting the hospital, a Sister met a patient from Thornton, who begged that the Sisters would do something for the children there. On visiting the village, and being unable to find a room for their work, the Sisters secured a somewhat dilapidated stable, long unused, which they were allowed to occupy—a very fitting place for the Sisters of the Holy Nativity. They opened a Sunday School, and a monthly Celebration of the Holy Communion was provided. The work was hard, physically and spiritually. At the end of the trolley trip, there was a half-hour's walk, often through rain or snow, to the village, where, as no rooms were to be had, the Sisters used the cold, wind-swept stalls of the stable as sleeping places when duties required them to remain over night. The work amongst the people was slow and difficult; for, long deprived of their Church, they had lost interest in it, and Sisters were regarded with doubt in some cases. But there came a strike, with men, women and girls idle, and soon there was great suffering. The Sisters carried help to the poor women and children, aided the sick and starving, collecting money for them from kind friends in Providence. They accomplished more than they had hoped for, for the men appreciated their sympathy and help, and at the meeting called for the settlement of the

strike they gave "three cheers for the Sisters." After this, the Sisters were valued as true friends, and soon after the Mission entered on days of prosperity. Funds were collected by the Sisters for a simple building to replace the old stable, and there is now a pretty Church with Guild House.

In 1905, the Community moved to its new Convent in Fond du Lac, the See City of its Founder. Its work there is chiefly at the Cathedral, at St. Michael's Church, North Fond du Lac—a parish composed chiefly of persons connected with the railroads—and at Grafton Hall, a finely equipped School for Girls, whom the Sisters teach in Sunday classes, and assist in their preparation for the Sacraments, thus doing a valuable mission work, as many girls enter the school in ignorance of the Church, and go away loyal young missionaries, to make known in their widely scattered homes the Church's Faith.

For over twenty years there have been two or three Sisters living on the Oneida Reservation, where the Community built a little house that they might minister to the Indians. They did much to assist the people materially by introducing, and at first directing, the lace industry. On Sundays, they give instruction at the Government School to a class of about a hundred children. Some of the girls of the School have been formed into a branch of the Junior Auxiliary, meeting at the Sisters' House on Saturdays. There is

also a Guild for young women. The Sisters have, of course, the care of the Altar and vestments in the well-appointed Church, which was built in great measure by the Indians themselves and is the central point of interest to the tribe.

In the west, the Sisters are also working in Milwaukee, at the Cathedral.

Several Houses of the Community are maintained in the east. The Sisters are in Providence, R. I., in the parish of St. Mary the Virgin, New York City, in St. Luke's Cathedral parish, Portland, Maine, and in St. John's parish, Newport, R. I.

In Providence, the Sisters have worked in St. Stephen's parish since 1889. They are now working also at Christ Church, the Church of the Redeemer, Grace Church, Phillipsdale, and Trinity Church, Bristol, R. I.

The House in Providence is the property of the Sisterhood, having been bought for it by the eastern Associates a number of years ago. It was a venture of faith on the part of these women, as only a very small part of the price was in hand. But the mortgage which was given on the property has now been paid except for a few hundred dollars.

The Sisters expect to open this year (1915) a House which will be primarily for Retreats. The plan is to provide a place for frequent Retreats—of one day or longer. Retreats or Quiet days for all classes of work-



THE OLD CONVENT, PROVIDENCE, R. I.

ers will be arranged—on Sunday or any day on which their occupations will allow them to be present. Also, besides these general Retreats, the House will be open to any wishing to make their own private Retreat of a day or more, and will offer a place of retirement for women who want to get out of the rush of the world for a little space and take account, as it were, of their spiritual condition and start afresh. The use of a very suitable house in Orange, N. J., has been

given them for this purpose. When the Sisters are settled there, they will also begin to work in the parish of All Saints, Orange.

The literary work of the Sisterhood forms one branch of its missionary service. "Vocation", written by the Founder, and his other spiritual writings, have long appealed to earnest souls, and have revealed to some the call to the Religious Life. "Our Family Ways", "The New Creation", and "The Holy Warfare", by a member of the Community, are widely known; also a valuable and interesting address on "The Religious Life", given by one of the Sisters to the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross at Adelynrood. "Self-consecration", a graceful translation of a French book of devotion by the Abbé Grou, was prepared by an Associate at the suggestion of the Community, and is dedicated to it. Other books and pamphlets are directly or indirectly included in the literary work of the Society.

At the Convent, the life of the Sisters is a round of constant, quiet activity and devotion. Some are engaged on fine needlework, for Altar Linen, and ecclesiastical embroidery for Altar hangings or vestments, for which the demand has increased greatly, and which, in elaborate designs and costly materials, are made to order, while from plainer material and simpler embroidery suitable vestments are made and sold at cost of material to poor parishes, or frequently

given to such as cannot afford to purchase—thus carrying on a work begun at the especial wish of the Founder, who desired a more general use of vestments for the purposes of impressing on the people the principles of the Faith by means of outward tokens, and of helping them to a more reverent worship.

Other Sisters bake, cut and pack Altar Breads of which 160,000 were sent out last year. Still others are engaged in filling the extensive orders received for the artistic devotional cards and pictures which are imported each year by thousands from England, France and Belgium. These cards, suitable for Christmas, Easter, birthdays and other occasions, are carefully selected, that they may be of real service and inspiration by their correct Church teaching and devotional and uplifting spirit.

By the wise counsel of the Founders, well-chosen books of doctrinal and spiritual instruction have from the earliest days of the Community been the efficient helpers of the Sisters, both for their own needs and those of the many to whom they minister, and who are eager to learn "Church doctrine, Bible truth" and the way to grow in Grace. A valuable aid in this work is a Lending Library, placed some years ago in the charge of the Community, after the death of the zealous Churchwoman who founded and long conducted it, and in whose memory it is called "The Margaret Peabody Lending Library". Hundreds of books from

this collection are sent out yearly (free of expense to the borrowers, except the return postage) to Priests, teachers, theological students, and others who could not otherwise obtain the often expensive literature of this nature, and who live in remote parts of this country and even foreign lands. The expense of outward postage and of new books, which are purchased as frequently as funds allow, is met by gifts from associates and others who have heard of the Library and want to help on its missionary work.

Portions of each day are devoted to study, reading and recreation. The members of the Novitiate pursue a definite and carefully planned course of study in the Bible, the Prayer-Book, in Church Doctrine, etc., designed as a preparation for the teaching which is an especial work of the Community.

The Sisters' day begins, of course, with the Coming of the Lord to the Altar. The recitation of the Divine Office, which has been called "The Voice of the Religious Life", with its psalms, hymns, antiphons and prayers, marks the canonical hours. Throughout the day the work of intercession goes on, the Sisters relieving each other at the prayer-desk every half hour. They plead for the great needs of the Church and its missions, for the world with its trials, dangers and sins, and for individual souls in suffering, or in darkness and longing for light. Many petitions are sent in from far and near. And with the petitions rise joyful thanks-

givings; for wonderful answers have come to the prayers whispered with devout faith into God's ear in the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament. This work of intercession is carried on at the Mission Houses of the Community also.

The Community is entered by the usual steps of six months as Postulant and two years as Novice, with an additional two years during which the Sisters, now called Junior Professed, are under temporary vows, preliminary to the life vows at the expiration of this time.

Though both the revered Founders have now gone to their rest in God, their spirit still breathes in the life of the Community. For nearly thirty years, by precept and example, with wisdom and love, they watched over and guided it, and had the joy of seeing God give great increase in ever-widening fields of labour, in fruitful service, and in numbers of earnest women who have come from east and west, north and south, in response to the call to the Religious Life in this Community, to which they have been led by some Priest's suggestion, through acquaintance with some Sister, or by the printed words of "Vocation", through which the Founder "being dead, yet speaketh."